

Interview a Library Leader: University of Saskatchewan Library

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Abstract

A Trojan family member, currently the University of Saskatchewan's (USask, Saskatoon, Canada) Dean of Library, Interim Provost, and Vice-President Academic Dr. Melissa Just in her interview shares her career progression and thoughts about her experiences and insights. As the Dean of Library Just oversees 130 faculty and staff, six branches, Education and Music Library, Engineering Library, Law Library, Leslie & Irene Dube Health Sciences Library, and Science Library, as well as University Archives & Special Collections, and Student Learning Services.

Interview a Library Leader

It was my greatest pleasure and a one of a kind opportunity to secure an interview with Dr. Melissa Just, an academic and research library leader with twenty-five years of experience. Dr. Just is the Dean of Library at the University of Saskatchewan (USask) and on July 1st she will start her appointment as the Interim Provost and Vice-President Academic.

Just is a part of the Trojan family; she earned her doctor of education degree from the University of Southern California (USC) in 2007 and continued as an adjunct faculty until 2009. Prior to that, she also earned her bachelor of arts “in psychobiology” from the University of California in 1991 and a master of library and information science from the University of Texas in 1994. Just’s contribution to the field included her leadership work at the USC and the University of California (1995 to 2006), and as a director of the Lee Graff Medical and Scientific Library in Duarte, California (2006-2009) and the Biomedical Library at the University of California San Diego (2009 to 2012). She then served as an associate vice-president for information services and director of New Brunswick Libraries prior to joining the USask in February 2017. “As Dean, Melissa is responsible for the strategic direction and general operations of the University Library, ensuring its continued contribution to the university’s goals, mission, vision, and values” (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, a.)

The USask Library includes six branches, Education and Music Library, Engineering Library, Law Library, Leslie & Irene Dube Health Sciences Library, and Science Library, as well as University Archives & Special Collections, and Student Learning Services. Its 130 faculty and staff serves its primary clients, faculty and students (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, b.) The library is open to the public to use electronic resources internally and has a signed memorandum of understanding with the City of Saskatoon allowing community members to borrow the books.

The library has complete autonomy in decision-making. Each branch has an operational manager reporting to the one of the two associate deans, who in turn, report to the dean. There are approximately 26% of faculty librarians with the rest being either professional staff or library technicians. Tasks completed centrally include policies development, subscriptions, and IT, while branches have autonomy in their decisions which programs to offer. The library's approximately \$26M budget is equally split between the collections and operations costs and is funded through two funding streams.

The Usask Library's vision, mission and core values, outlined in its *Strategic Framework 2025* (University of Saskatchewan, 2020 c.) identify "core purpose" as advancement of "learning, research, and collaborations across our diverse community thorough the unique combination of academic support services, inclusive spaces, and relevant and distinctive collections" and its "aspiration" as "an intellectual hub where people, information, and ideas connect to create and share knowledge to ensure a sustainable future." The Usask invests in the "academic freedom," "collaboration," "commitment to community," "different ways of knowing, learning and being," "diversity, equality and human dignity," "excellence," "a healthy work and learning environment," "innovation, curiosity, and creativity," "openness, transparency, and accountability," "reconciliation," and "sustainability" principles (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, c). It strikes to act in accordance with "collegiality," "fairness and equitable treatment," "inclusiveness," "integrity, honesty, and ethical behavior," and "respect" values (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, c.) The USask's strategic commitments are to "decolonize the Library," "build research infrastructure," "enhance student learning," and "foster academic community" (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, c.) These vision and mission align well with a systematic review, co-authored by the USask librarian (Boden, Ascher, & Eldredge, 2018), of 80 leaders

and team members from health sciences libraries around the world, “Thematic analysis of the short-answer questions yielded five broad themes: learning and experience, interpersonal (networking), teamwork, outcomes, and barriers.” Among “learning and experience” theme those voiced were “hands-on,” “practical skills,” and “leadership skills,” among “teamwork” named were “team dynamics,” “communication,” (p. 288), “leaderships and value of a good leader,” and “project management,” “demonstrates the value of experiential learning for acquiring synthesis review skills and knowledge.”

One of the most recent achievements of Just includes her leadership work on the development of the library’s master plan (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, d.) *The University Library Transformation Project Branch Libraries Master Plan*, 187-pages document, proposes to meet the needs of various stakeholders by creating “spaces” including “simulations suites, experiential learning spaces, research commons, digitization suites, teaching spaces, spaces for students to de-stress and decompress,” as well as “individual, group, and community study and work spaces.” Most of the books will be moved to a storage facility and the number of duplicates will be reduced. Key concepts of this plan are “knowledge creation,” “mobility + social media,” “library vibrancy,” “effective study process,” and “focus on “We” not “Me” (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, d & e.)

Just told me the USask, like every other North American university, struggles with “the unsustainable rising costs of subscriptions set by publishers, in addition to the fluctuating value of the Canadian dollar and the monopolization of publishing companies” (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, f.) In order to balance its budget, the library had to cancel some electronic resources and serial subscriptions (as of January 1, 2020), including the Taylor & Francis and Wiley-Blackwell subscriptions. Similar to the University of California which recently cancelled

the Elsevier subscription (Ellis, 2019 and University of Saskatchewan, 2020, f.) Though the USask library's budget remained flat, its collection budget was reduced by 2.2% for the 2019-2020 fiscal year due to the continuous rise of electronic resources costs together with a Canadian dollar being at US\$0.75; this resulted in the reduction of \$1.38M (University of Saskatchewan, 2020, f.) As per Smith, & Wong (2016), "acquiring electronic sources, including databases, eJournals, eBooks, and services such as discovery systems" is becoming challenging. "Pricing is based on anticipated usage, often calculated by the number of patrons the library serves" (p. 396). In fact, "academic libraries pay \$350,000 to \$9 million annually in subscription fees." (MacDonald, & Eva, 2018).

The USask library will hold on to more than 1,600 titles through perpetual access agreements signed prior to 2019. Library patrons are encouraged to use interlibrary loans, institutional repository HARVEST, and direct contact with an author, or an open access such as OpenDOAR options. The latter option is being actively promoted. The USask Library (2020, June 5, f) makes a recommendation to researchers to "publish in ethical and innovative open access outlets," ensure that a version of every article you publish is openly available," "review and provide editorial work only for ethical and innovative open access outlets," and "reform tenure and promotion standards in your department, school, or college" among several options for researchers to consider. Canadian Tri-Agency has an open access policy in place requiring federally funded researchers to publish their research freely and made accessible to all. However, such open access is not free, but an eligible expense on federal research grants. MacDonald and Eva (2018) agree this is a first step, but propose researchers charge for their peer-reviews. U15 group of Canadian universities (2017), the University of Saskatchewan part of, made a statement

calling for the need “to maximize knowledge transfer and impact, our researchers’ work must be made readily available around the globe.”

On my question about the defining characteristics of the USask library, Just told me about one of the USask’s signature areas ‘Indigenous Peoples’ and the role of the library in indigenization and decolonization. Our conversation then shifted towards the discussion about the importance for the library to start a conversation about the need to change ‘Indians of North America’ subject heading. ‘Indians’ is no longer acceptable and should be replaced with ‘First Nation’ or ‘Indigenous’ and it is a time to start a conversation with the Library of Congress on the topic.

In conclusion, Just shared with me her beliefs that in order for an academic library to be successful, the library has to demonstrate its willingness to help the university to become successful, it has to share the same values and goals. For example, the USask library helps the university’s rankings as one of the top medical doctoral universities in Canada by holding number two spot in library expenses for several years in a row (Maclean’s, 2019.)

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